DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 943 EC 211 088

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TITLE The Work of the Special Education Director: A Field Study.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 5-9, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Organization; Administrator Attitudes; *Administrator Role; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Naturalistic Observation; Organizational Communication; Principals; Qualitative Research; School Organization; Special Education Teachers; *Supervision; *Supervisors; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Special Education Directors

ABSTRACT

The first of a projected series of three studies addressing the differing organizational contexts of the special education director's work and the resulting consequences, this investigation examined the work of a special education director in a "staff" position with respect to the consequences to the district at this organizational placement choice. The naturalistic inquiry methodology involved open-ended and semi-structured interviews with the subject open-ended and semi-structured interviews with the subject special education director, other administrators, and special education teachers. Intensive field observations of the subject at work over a 3-day period were made and all special education teachers in the subject's district were surveyed. Analysis indicated that the director's work includes two functions, management and supervision, with the director's "staff office" position constraining the exercise of direct control over special education services at the building level; thus the director relies primarily on "expert power" processes to accomplish supervision. Advantages of such an organizational system to the district include visible involvement of principals in the special education process and little conflict between principals and director. Disadvantages include the unmet need of teachers for both closer supervision by the director and stronger advocacy with principals and the unmet need of the director for more direct control of special education services at the building level. (DB)

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# THE WORK OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR: A FIELD STUDY

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This paper was prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 5-9, 1988.

EC 211058

# THE WORK OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR: A FIELD STUDY

## Introduction

In the 1980's, most school districts of 2,000 or more students employ a full-time special education director. Typically the director is charged with important responsibility for the district's programming for exceptional students. However, the nature of the work of the special education director and the role of this position in relation to the school district organization are poorly understood. This ambiguity can lead to conflict and confusion within the district hierarchy (Podemski, Price, Smith, & Marsh, 1984). For example, the often unresolved question of whether the director should exercise direct, line control over special education teachers and services or share this function with building principals can lead to questions of "Who is in charge of whom?" at the building level.

The sparse research literature related to special education administration reflects this ambiguity regarding the special education director's work and position within the organization. Regarding the nature of the director's work, the few extant studies have focused primarily on identifying "tasks" that comprise the work. Newman (1970) classified tasks performed by directors using Urwick's well-known POSDCORB taxonomy. Marro and Kohl (1975) conducted a nation-wide survey to investigate several aspects of the role. And Nutter, Forgnone, McBride, and Boone (1983) used

a variety of data gathering methods to classify work functions according to their own, a priori taxonomy.

While these inquiries have yielded some interesting results, taken as a whole they fail to provide a cohesive picture of the director's work. Perhaps these efforts have not been fruitful because they are based almost exclusively on survey-type methodology which is designed around a priori (and often differing) conceptions of what an administrative role ought to be. Such an approach does not allow for discovering the characteristics of the role as it is actually performed in context.

Regarding the director's position in relation to the school district organization, the studies reported in the literature have focused on problems of role conflict or ambiguity. Robson (1981) surveyed school district personnel to explore differences in role expectations regarding special education administration. Whitworth and Hatley (1982) interviewed special education directors as to their levels of responsibility and authority. Role conflict experienced by special education administrators was studied by Hebert and Miller (1985) using qualitative methods. And Roth (1986-87) investigated the effects of role ambiguity on total special education program quality.

The results of these few studies suggest that the special education director's position within the district is, indeed, often ambiguous and that such ambiguity may have negative effects in the form of administrator stress and

program quality. However, this line of research has not been extended to address the effects of differing organizational contexts on the nature of the director's work and resultant consequences to the district.

## The Study

As a response to the lacuna in the research literature, a series of studies were designed in the tradition of educational ethnography established by Wolcott (1973). To allow for eventual comparison of data, the first two studies were designed to focus on special education directors in similar sized districts who hold positions that differ in terms of placement within the organization. The first study focuses on the work of a special education director who holds a "staff" position with respect to the organizational structure of the district. This study has been completed and is reported here. The second study will focus on a director who holds a "line" position. And the third study will survey a large number of special education directors to test the hypotheses generated in the first two studies. The overall purpose of the series of studies is to discover the outlines of a grounded theory regarding the nature of the work of special education directors in relation to organizational context.

Two questions guided the study reported here. First, what is the nature of the work of the special education director given a particular organizational context (in this case, placement of the director in a "staff" position)?

Second, what are the consequences to the district of this organizational placement choice?

In keeping with the purpose of the study, a naturalistic inquiry methodology was used. The researcher first identified through peer nomination a special education director who would agreed to participate in the study and who held an appropriate "staff" position. Data were then collected through traditional field study techniques. Open-ended and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the subject special education director, other administrators and special education teachers. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Intensive field observations of the subject at work over a three-day period were made. A survey was distributed to all special education teachers in the subject's district; 88% were returned.

Following the data collection phase, the data were categorized and analyzed in accordance with traditional qualitative research practices (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lofland and Lofland, 1984).

## The Situation

Mr. Winter has been special education director in Pines School District for the last six years. Pines is a small, university town district in Idaho with a student enrollment of approximately 2,600. The district operates six school buildings--one high school, one junior high school, and four neighborhood elementary schools.

As special education director, Mr. Winter is given the responsibility to oversee all special education services provided by the district. On paper, his responsibilities are to "organize, supervise and evaluate programs provided for exceptional students". To provide special education services, the district employs 18 full-time special education teachers, some assigned to resource rooms to serve mildly handicapped students, and some assigned to self-contained classrooms to serve more severely handicapped students. In addition, the district employs a number of full-time itinerant therapists who travel from building to building.

Mr. Winter and the current superintendent were hired in the same year. At that time, the new superintendent and the school board decided to change the special education director's job description to limit direct control of personnel at the building level. Two factors influenced this decision. First, there was a history of conflict between the previous special education director and the building principals regarding authority to supervise special education teachers. The previous director, described as "authoritarian," wanted direct control of teachers while principals felt that this threatened their hegemony within their buildings. Second, the newly hired superintendent agreed that principals should be the direct supervisors of all personnel within their buildings, including special education teachers, believing that this arrangement promotes

the principal's "ownership" of special education services and thus the mainstreaming of special education students.

Thus, Mr. Winter is in a "staff" position in relation to special education personnel. Though his job description charges him with responsibility to "organize, supervise and evaluate programs," it also explicitly limits direct supervision to a few specialist positions and specifies that he act as a "consultant to building principals" regarding evaluation of special education teachers. He retains direct supervision of only one itinerant teacher consultant plus the few itinerant therapists, but continues to be accountable for the appropriate functioning of all special education services.

Mr. Winter spends about half of his working day in his office in the aging central administration building. Here he works in relative privacy, his office being "down the hall" in a somewhat isolated location. Mr. Winter uses his office time for paperwork and telephone calls, with occasional impromptu meetings with other administrators. He spends a good deal of time on the telephone, using it as a communication link to the school buildings and outside agencies. On one wall of his office a chalkboard is filled with items representing projects that Mr. Winter intends to do. Several of these items begin with the words, "Develop a policy to . . ." Mr. Winter explains that these items relate to "recurring problems" within the district.

When not in his office, Mr. Winter is usually attending meetings or commuting between school buildings. As a member of the district's "management team," he and other central office personnel meet frequently with the superintendent to discuss administrative procedures and policy recommendations. In the schools, he participates in regularly scheduled special education team meetings. These meetings make programming decisions for individual students and are attended by principals, regular education teachers and specialists. Mr. Winter does not act as leader of these teams, leaving that role to the building principals. However, he is an active participant, viewing himself as a valuable resource person. In these team meetings and all other observed interactions with district personnel, he maintains a friendly, outgoing manner. Others describe him as a "talker" who succeeds in building "rapport" with his colleagues.

## Analytic Framework

Briner and Iannaccone (1966) develop a series of hypotheses regarding social power relationships within organizations, based on Funk's study of administrative roles. By "social power" (p. 191) they mean the influence exerted by one person over others in the organization. This influence will be exercised in different ways depending on the influencer's position.

Briner and Iannaccone argue that administrators such as principals are in "line-office" (p. 196) positions. Their

basis of power is rooted in the authority of the office as legitimated through organizational rules and is reflected in words they use to describe their work: "organizes, directs, supervises, exercises, administers, plans, allocates, and certifies" (p. 193). In attempting to influence others line-officers such as principals may rely on "legal power" (p. 203), that is, the power to issue administrative directives.

Administrators such as supervisors, on the other hand, occupy "staff-office" (p. 195) positions. Their basis of power lies in prestige derived from repeated demonstrations of technical expertise rather than in legal jurisdiction. They describe their work in these terms: "provides, assists, participates, develops, plans, furnishes, and conducts" (p. 193). Thus, staff-officers influence others through the use of "expert power" (p. 196).

Briner and Iannaccone suggest that conflict between line and staff officers will be mitigated "to the extent that each uses a different basis of social power" (p. 201) when relating to common subordinates. However, when conflicts cannot be resolved, they may be kicked "upstairs" (p. 200) to a mutual superordinate for resolution.

Briner and Iannaccone's concept of social power is a useful tool for understanding the influence of organizational context on certain aspects of the special education director's work, as will be demonstrated in the following analysis. It should be noted, however, that the

use of this framework is not meant to imply that principals, in contrast to "staff-officers," rely primarily on "legal power" to influence teachers. Indeed, it is possible that principals also rely primarily on "expert power" to influence teachers, due to the loosely-coupled nature of superordinate influence over teachers' work. However, this recognition does not reduce the utility of the framework when considering the work of a staff-officer who lacks even the potential use of "legal power."

## The Analysis

The work of the special education director in this district is largely conditioned by federal and state laws and regulations. These laws and regulations place certain demands on the school district. To receive special education funds, the district must comply with highly prescriptive rules covering such procedures as assessment, placement, and programming for exceptional students. The district must allocate these funds in a prescribed manner and fulfill certain specialized reporting requirements. The special education director is given the responsibility to ensure that the district complies with all these rules and provides a quality program for exceptional students.

To fulfill this responsibility, the director engages in two basic work functions, <u>management</u> and <u>supervision</u>. Management includes all administrative tasks personally performed by the director, such as budget development, recruitment of staff, public relations, report writing, and

general paperwork. For example, the director spends time on the telephone tracking down prospective teachers, obtaining information on equipment purchases, or coordinating programs with outside agencies. He signs purchase orders authorizing expenditures from special education funds and writes letters to state agencies as necessary. The director typically performs these and other management tasks when he is alone in his centrally located office.

Supervision, on the other hand, refers to the director's efforts to ensure that eligible students receive appropriate special education services within the district. The term supervision is used since the director does not personally provide these services, but is responsible for the quality of services provided by others.

Supervision is recognized as the director's most important function; through it, the director monitors the provision of direct services to eligible students, which is the fundamental purpose of the special education program. Yet, the director must accomplish supervision given the constraints of an organizational position that limits his direct authority over others. Specifically, the director in this district is in a "staff" position in relation to principals and teachers. He must try to influence the behavior of principals and teachers without the use of administrative directives, as a "line" position would allow. Further, the superintendent's philosophy creates expectations that principals will manage special education

services in their buildings, including supervising of special education teachers. Thus, a problematic situation is created for the director in this district. How can supervision of services be accomplished without direct control over others who are providing the service?

The director responds to this problem by using three distinct processes to accomplish the supervision function. First, he formulates and continually revises a handbook of guidelines for the provision of special education services. The guidelines are the director's attempt to translate federal and state rules and regulations into "district operational terms." These guidelines provide a framework for principals and teachers for conducting special education services. Since they are guidelines rather than directives, but carry the weight of the director's expertise, they are an example of the director's use of "expert power" to influence others.

Second, the director engages in continual consultation with principals and teachers to influence their work behavior in relation to the guidelines. Two examples will be illustrative. The director participates in team meetings in the schools. Though the meetings are chaired by building principals, the director is available as a source of expert knowledge, particularly regarding legal questions. In these meetings, the director also receives information as to the concerns of principals and teachers and the general state of special education services.

As a second example, the director is called in, typically by special education teachers, to resolve conflicts between principals and teachers. To resolve such conflicts, the director often refers the parties back to the guidelines. The director typifies his role in these and other instances as "facilitator," describing himself as "connective tissue" for the special education area. He further confirms his use of consultation by stating that, without a "specific hierarchical system," he must rely on human relations skills to have any impact within the organization. In this use of consultation, the director is, again, relying on "expert power" to influence others, rather than direct line authority.

Third, under certain circumstances, the director turns to policy development to influence special education service providers. He states that policies are needed in "sensitive areas" where "mistakes can put you in jeopardy," or when there are unresolved "disagreements" concerning special education services. Thus, policy development is used when the "expert power" processes of formulation of guidelines and consultation fail to meet supervision needs, that is, when problems or conflicts continue to be unresolved.

One example is a recently adopted policy on grading handicapped students. The assignment of grades to handicapped students had been problematic for some time, with inconsistent procedures across the schools raising legal questions of discrimination. Mr. Winter's efforts to

better coordinate grading procedures by consulting with teachers and principals were not succeeding to the extent he deemed necessary. Following a series of meetings with special education personnel, the director developed a policy on grading which he submitted to the superintendent and the school board for approval. As this example illustrates, policy development may involve the referral of a problem back "upstairs" so the resolution will carry the weight of the superintendent's and school board's formal approval. In such cases, policy development is a resort to the use of a superordinate's "legal power" when the director's "expert power" is ineffective. As the director states, "When it comes to policies, they [his superordinates] will listen to me."

The placement of the special education director in a staff position and the resultant reliance on expert power processes for supervision has certain consequences for the district, some advantageous, some disadvantageous. In the district in this study, there appear to be two advantageous consequences. First, principals are visibly involved in the special education process, chairing team meetings and participating in supervision and evaluation of special education teachers. Since this is in line with the superintendent's philosophy, the superintendent and school board are satisfied with this result. Second, there is little apparent conflict between principals and the director. It would appear that the question of "Who's in

charge of whom?" regarding special education teachers has been resolved. These advantageous consequences, taken together, have the effect of keeping the level of dissonance surrounding the special education area at a tolerable level.

There are also apparent disadvantages to this orientation. First, as revealed on special education teacher surveys and in interviews with them, most special education teachers feel the need for both closer supervision by the director and stronger advocacy with principals. Typical responses to the question, "Tell what the special education director should be doing that he's not doing now" were: "Better provide a feeling that he could provide teaching skills for specific cases;" "Stronger leadership in staff development;" and "Lobbying administrators for better facilities." These reactions imply that the teachers are not satisfied with supervision by the building principals and that they do not have confidence in the consultative process that occurs between the director and the principals.

Second, the director himself expresses a level of dissatisfaction in that he would like to have more direct control of special education services at the building level. In this he reflects the opinions of special education directors surveyed by Marro and Kohl (1975). The majority of directors in their study felt that their responsibilities far exceeded their authority within their districts.

Given the longevity of the organizational set-up in the present study, it is apparent that the advantageous

consequences noted previously outweigh the disadvantageous consequences and tend to stabilize the current organizational arrangement. Another way to say this is that the dissatisfaction experienced by the director and the special education teachers tends to be ignored by the system as long as the superintendent and principals are satisfied, keeping the dissonance level in check.

## Conclusion

As the first in a series of three studies, the present study has attempted to explore the nature of the work of a special education director with specific regard to a "staff" position within the organization. It was found that the subject director's work includes two functions, management and supervision, with supervision being problematic because of the director's position within the organizational hierarchy. Specifically, the director's "staff-office" position constrains the exercise of direct control over special education services at the building level; thus, the director relies primarily on "expert power" processes to accomplish the work of supervision. The use of such processes has certain consequences for the district, some advantageous, some disadvantageous. In this particular district, the disadvantageous consequences tend to be ignored, while the advantageous consequences tend to stabilize the present organizational set-up.

The results of this study suggest the following more generic model of the special education director's work in

relation to organizational position: The work of the special education director consists of two basic functions, management and supervision. The processes used to carry out the supervision function are conditioned by the position of the director within the organizational structure of the district. These processes, in turn, have consequences for the district, some advantageous, some disadvantageous. When the organizational structure endures over time, it can be assumed that the advantageous consequences outweigh the disadvantageous consequences, tending to stabilize the system.

This model remains to be tested in the two subsequent studies of the series. Specifically, the second study will test whether placement of the director in a "line" position has effects on the nature of the director's work and consequences for the district which differ from those found in the present study, while the third study will use survey methodology to test the generalizability of the model across a large number of special education director positions. Thus the hypothetical model developed in this first study will be tested and modified as necessary, resulting in a grounded, theoretical model of the nature of the special education director's work in relation to organizational context. An intriguing extension of this line of research would be to investigate effects at the student level, that

is, to explore whether the director's position within the organization has an effect on the quality of direct services provided to students.

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